

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B2021

The readings of this Sunday talk about the reality of suffering and sacrifice. They show that the service of God and the reality of his kingdom cannot go without the cross. They invite us to accept our part of sacrifice for the sake of God's kingdom.

The first reading talks about the suffering of the servant of God and his obedience in fulfilling his vocation. It shows how, instead of rebelling against God's will, he accepted mistreatment without resisting. It also shows the trust he put in God who could save him from the hands of his enemies.

What is behind this text is the idea that the service of God is not a piece of cake, but a real warfare. There is also the idea that, in order to win this warfare, one needs to be courageous by confronting with God's help the adverse circumstances in which he works. The last idea is related to the truth that those who count on God will never be disappointed, but rather will be sustained and defended by him.

This text allows us to understand what the point of today's Gospel as Jesus asks us to take up our cross and to follow him. First of all, the Gospel says that Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the town of Caesarea of Philippi. It gives a report on the question that he asked his disciples over what people think of his identity.

Then, it gives the answer Peter gave to the same question on behalf of the twelve as he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. After that, the Gospel gives the forbidding of Jesus to reveal his true identity and the announcement of his passion. The Gospel ends up with Peter's reaction and Jesus' statement about the cross.

What do we learn from this Gospel? In today's Gospel Jesus is asking his apostles to tell him what people say that he is. In fact, according to some opinion, people said he was John the Baptist; others thought that he was Elijah, and still others one of the prophets. All these opinions are beautiful and reveal something of what Jesus is, but in truth they are not correct: they are half-true.

That is the reason why Jesus turned to his disciples in order to see what they themselves think of him. Simon Peter, on behalf of the other disciples, responded that he was the Christ. Now, here is question. How did Peter come to such a response that is true and corresponding to what Jesus truly is? He has come to that response thanks to his close relationship with Jesus, not a relationship lived from outside, but from within. In other words, it is thanks to his life of intimacy with Jesus that he discovered that he was really the Messiah. It is like a spouse accused of some wrong doing. His or Her partner can simply say: "you do not know very well that man or that woman. I can really vouch for him or her. He or She is not anything of what you say.

This is very important in order the point of today's Gospel. I want you to imagine that you are in the presence of Jesu right now. He is looking you in the eyes and asking you: "What do you personally say that I am?" This is the challenge before which we are today: "Who is Jesus for you?" Or to put it in personal terms: "Who is Jesus for me?" (I leave you 60 seconds of silence for you to formulate your response).

I guess that you have said a couple of things like: He is the savior of the world or He is my savior; He died on the cross for me; He is the redeemer; He is someone who has compassion for the poor; He is our intercessor to the Father; He is someone who

forgives sins; He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. All these answers are true and say something of what Jesus is.

However, I want to suggest another way of looking at Jesus by saying: Jesus is a friend. From where do I draw the title of Jesus as a friend? In the Gospel, indeed, Jesus says this: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (John 15: 13-15).

If that is true that Jesus is a friend, then, there are some consequences I want to share with you: First, intimacy. Intimacy means opening of our heart to Jesus so that he knows our thoughts, our deeds, our joys and our sadness, our dreams and expectations, what is going on with us on a daily basis and what our plans of life are. There is nothing detrimental to a relation of friendship than to remain secret, to live in hypocrisy, avoid to talking to a friend frankly and sincerely. Our Christian way of keeping the intimacy with the Lord is through the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Second, conversation. A friend to whom we do not talk will end up being a stranger. Any relationship in which we neglect to meet very often a friend in order to chat, to spend times together, will stop existing one day. How can you keep a relationship alive if you do not talk to the person anymore? The conversation with Jesus is kept alive through prayer. Prayer is an intimate conversation with the Lord, a dialogue of heart to heart, where we tell Jesus our thoughts and listens to him when he speaks to us through the Scriptures and in the silence of the heart.

Third, the cross. Jesus is not any friend, but rather a friend who gave his life on the cross for us. The cross, indeed, is part of our life; there is no way of escaping it. It may take many forms or faces; but whatever might be its form or face, it remains always something heavy, which we have to bear and to deal with for the whole of our life.

The cross can appear in the sickness or the illness we have and we want to get rid of without success. It can appear in a broken relationship we try to fix without success. It can appear in the sacrifice we have to accept for the good of those under our care. It can appear in the disappointment that plagues our life, etc.

It would be an illusion to think of Christian life without the cross. In truth, we cannot follow Jesus without being ready to take up our cross after him. The cross is our means of connection to Jesus, to his suffering and death. Only after it, can we have access to the resurrection. As he did, so shall we do, because it is only by losing our life here on earth that we can win it for eternal life. Let us ask Jesus to help us bear our daily crosses with patience and faithfulness! May he make us his good friends!

Isaiah 50: 5-9a; James 2: 14-18; Mark 8: 27-35



Homily Date: September 15, 2018
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20180915homily.pdf